



Reaching Out:

The Three Movements of the Spiritual Life

Henri J.M. Nouwen,

Doubleday, 1975 (165 pgs)

Review by Mrs Pauline Koe

If there is a spiritual friend who never fails me it must be Henri Nouwen. Out of his own inner conflicts and unfulfilled needs he speaks words of hope and encouragement that resonate with me. Simply because he shares himself so honestly in his books every encounter I've had with him has given me a profound sense of his companionship in my own spiritual journey.

In this book Nouwen offers us some deep insights into that most basic question a believer has: What does it mean to live a life in the Spirit of Jesus Christ? His answer is that we have to "reach out, with courageous honesty to our innermost self, with relentless care to our fellow human beings, and with increasing prayer to our God."

In each of these areas of human experience we are held in tension between two poles. In our relationship with ourselves there is the polarity between loneliness and solitude; with others it is between hostility and hospitality and with God it is between illusion and prayer. The spiritual life is that constant movement between these poles and "the more we come to the painful confession of our loneliness, hostilities and illusions, the more we are able to see solitude, hospitality and prayer as part of the vision of our life".

We are all lonely people but we yearn for unity and wholeness. Nouwen says, "to live a spiritual life we must first find the courage to enter into the desert of our loneliness and to change it by gentle and persistent efforts into a garden of solitude." He encourages us to develop a solitude of heart simply through living our questions (by being patient with our unsolved needs) and being present to ourselves (giving reflective attention to what we're going through). "Without the solitude of heart, our

relationships with others easily become needy and greedy, sticky and cling, dependent and sentimental, exploitative and parasitic, because without the solitude of heart we cannot experience the others as different from ourselves but only as people who can be used for the fulfillment of our own, often hidden, needs".

Nouwen goes further by suggesting the movement towards solitude is not withdrawal but rather should lead into involvement with the "burning issues of our time". He encourages us to give a "creative response" by expressing contrition, protest and compassion for the many situations of human suffering in the world. In effect, as we learn to respond in love to individuals in our personal life, we are called also to widen our circle of concern to embrace the whole of humanity.

The second movement involves interpersonal relationship. Here Nouwen offers the biblical concept of hospitality as one that welcomes the stranger, not just into the home but into the heart. The stranger, if given the space and freedom to be what he is, may bring us gifts to enrich our lives. Hospitality described as the creation of a free and friendly space can be applied to relationships between parents and children, teachers and students, healers and patients. For each of these Nouwen has useful insights to share. He reminds us that even as we grant freedom to others we also need to establish boundaries and sometimes, even to confront, as we relate out of our own freedom. But it is finally an ability to embrace a poverty of mind and heart that makes us really good hosts for then we will be prepared to empty ourselves for the other just as Christ "emptied" himself for us.

In the most important movement of all, that from illusion to prayer, Nouwen deals with that profound part of our spiritual life with an honest recognition of its difficulty and elusiveness. But without an intimacy with God there will be no firm undergirding for our practice of solitude and hospitality. Reaching out to God involves giving up the illusion of our own immortality, wrestling with the paradox that prayer is both something we learn to do as well as something we receive as a gift and living with another paradox, the absence and the presence of

God.

If we are to live a life a prayer we need to take concrete steps to realise it. Nouwen offers these simple guidelines: there must be a “contemplative reading of the word of God, a silent listening to the voice of God and a trusting obedience to a spiritual guide”. He also considers the importance of belonging to the community of faith but reminds us that it exists primarily to direct us to God, and not merely to each other.

Reaching Out is a wonderfully humble book about being human and being spiritual. I can't even begin to describe the great gain I've made for myself reading it. I hope you will too.

Chapel Notes

Mr Teng Kay Sing, a preacher from Orchard Road Presbyterian Church, was the speaker at chapel (April 19), and he chose as his text II Timothy 3:10-4:8.

His reflections may be summed up in three words: persecution, aberration, and inspiration.

First, persecution is an on-going reality (3:12), with some Asian countries receiving a high rating on the global “persecution index”.

Secondly, aberration is the order of the day (3:13). New heresies emerge from day to day, as witness the interest expressed over Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code* and the recent media coverage on *The Gospel of Judas*. Divorce rate in Singapore is at an all-time high. Maid abuse, rampant as it is, has sometimes been perpetrated by the highly educated. How should one respond?

This leads to the final thought, inspiration. Paul's antidote, the speaker argues, lies in a return to confidence in the Scriptures (3:16). This itself, though, is fraught with danger – the danger of being involved in fruitless theological debate or philosophical discussion.

Chapel ended with a summons to keep our heads up, persevere in the quest for truth, and reach out to those willing and ready for an intelligent presentation of the Gospel (4:5).

(As summarised by Ng Seng Chuan).

Chapel Speaker on May 3 will be Mr William Tham.

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NEWS BITS

1. **Closure on Labour Day and Polling Day.** BGST library and offices will be closed on May 1 (Labour Day) and May 6 (Polling Day).

2. **Library Notice: Bibleworks version 7** is now available at \$550. If we can consolidate our orders, there could be savings of approximately \$80. For consolidation of order, please send your request to lib@bgst.edu.sg and for inquiries, please call Kok Weng at 92992280.

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